

Gospel Doctrine Lesson 42: "Pure Religion"

(James)

LESSON GOAL: By accepting the gospel with faith, we learn to exhibit that faith in day-to-day living patterns.

The book of James speaks to our **HEARTS** and to our **HABITS**. It describes a gospel of **WORKS**. James is all about **DOING** rather than about **KNOWING** or **UNDERSTANDING**.

Background to the Epistle of James

D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner: "The Epistle of James is one of the earliest writings in the New Testament and was written to Church members in general. James was the half-brother of Jesus, known by the Hebrew name Jacob (James is the Greek form), and was converted after the resurrection, possibly at the ascension of his Brother into heaven. He was probably an Apostle, was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, and was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin in A.D. 62, about 15 years after this epistle was written" (*New Testament Apostles Testify of Christ*, 264).

Prelude to Reading James

PRINCIPLES TO PROMOTE AND ACTIVATE DOING IN OUR LIVES:

A. Asking specific questions

President Harold B. Lee taught, "Every one of us, if we would reach perfection, must [at] one time ask ourselves this question, 'What lack I yet?'" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee* (2000), 197)

Larry R. Lawrence: The journey of discipleship is not an easy one. It is a "course of steady improvement." . . . However, we need to ask the Lord for directions along the way.

We have to ask some difficult questions, like

"What do I need to change?"

"How can I improve?"

"What weakness needs strengthening?"

"What is keeping me from progressing?"

WHAT LACK I YET?

Examples of answers members received from asking, "What lack I yet?"

- stop complaining
- clean up your language
- get up and clean your room
- I'm sorry. It was my fault.
- don't interrupt people when they are talking
- choose movies and music more carefully
- observe the Sabbath more carefully
- be more honest in dealings

"Like you, I have received many messages from the Spirit over the years showing me **how I could improve**. Let me share a few personal examples of messages that I took to heart. These promptings have included:

- Don't raise your voice.
- Organize yourself; create a daily list of things to do.
- Take better care of your body by eating more fruits and vegetables.
- Increase your temple attendance.
- Take time to ponder before you pray.
- Ask your wife for her counsel.
- And be patient when driving; don't exceed the speed limit. (I'm still working on that last one.)"

(Larry R. Lawrence, "What Lack I Yet?" General Conference, October 2015, *Ensign*, 33)

B. Pondering and Meditating

- **Joseph Smith:** "The things of God are of deep import; and...careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them." (TPJS, 137)
- **President David O. McKay:** "Meditation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord." (*Man May Know for Himself*, 23)

We must take action on the truths we learn.

- "I at length came to the determination to 'ask of God'." (Joseph Smith-History 1:13-14)
- "So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt."

By acting on this truth, much more was revealed to the Prophet. ; it became the catalyst for an outpouring of truth.

C. Being Obedient

Ryan Holmes: "The first law of heaven is **obedience**. "He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things" (D&C 93:28). Righteousness and truth are inseparably connected.

- I learned that when I was **obedient**, when I was trying my best to be righteous, I had a valid expectation to have the companionship of the Holy Ghost.
- I also learned that I had to **explicitly ask for specific guidance**. Let me repeat that **explicitly ask for specific guidance**. . .
- I learned that when I combined my best efforts with **very specific pondering and prayer**, things went better—much better . . .
- I wholeheartedly recommend the practice of **being very specific in your personal prayers and avoiding the generalities** that so easily turn into vain repetition. (BYU Devotional, "The Truth of All Things," May 7, 2013).

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

1. We should endure affliction patiently.

James 1:2-4: 2 My brethren, count it all joy **when ye fall into divers temptations [many afflictions]**; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But **let patience have her perfect work**, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

James 1:12-16,19: Blessed is the man that **endureth temptation**: for when he is tried, **he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him**. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But **every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed**. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren. . . Wherefore, my beloved brethren, **let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:**

James 5:7-11: **Be patient** therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. **Grudge not one against another**, brethren, **lest ye be condemned**: behold, the judge standeth before the door. Take, my brethren, **the prophets**, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for **an example of suffering affliction, and of patience**. Behold, **we count them happy which endure**. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

Orson F. Whitney: "No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as **patience, faith, fortitude and humility**. All that we suffer and all that we endure, **especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable**, more worthy to be called the children of God" (Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 98).

Neal A. Maxwell: "Can we expect to become like Him, given our imperfections, unless we can learn to accept and apply needed reproof and correction? . . . How essential **our capacity to receive correction** and reproof is, for "he that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding." (Prov. 15:32) Deserved self-esteem depends upon our meekness. . . In our personal development, the emery wheel of events can polish us, and the sandpaper of circumstances can smooth us. **Too often, when so worked upon, we grow fearful instead of being trusting and submissive**. But Peter overcame his fearfulness, and so can we" (*Even As I Am*, 63).

APPLICATION: Trials help us develop patience and bless us with deeper love when we endure them patiently.

2. Pure religion simply defines our religion.

James 1:27: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, **To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the vices of the world.**"

Here is a simple definition of religion: 1) to serve others, and 2) to purify ourselves. All of our righteous aims in life can be contained in these two categories.

C.S. Lewis explains how we become purified: "People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that **every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before.** And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other" (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, quoted in *The C.S. Lewis Bible*, 1,398).

Joseph F. Smith: "Then what is religion? James declares: 'Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: **To visit the fatherless and widows in their afflictions, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.**' This may be interpreted as meaning that a person who is religious is thoughtful to the unfortunate, and has an inner spirit that prompts to deeds of kindness and to the leading of a blameless life; who is just, truthful; who does not, as Paul says, think more highly of himself than he ought to think; who is affectionate, patient in tribulation, diligent, cheerful, fervent in spirit, hospitable, merciful; and who abhors evil and cleaves to that which is good. The possession of such a spirit and feeling is a true sign that a person is naturally religious" (*Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, 1939, 121).

3. We should pray to God in faith.

James 1:5-7: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall received any thing of the Lord."

Bruce R. McConkie: "This single verse of scripture—James 1:5--has had a greater impact and a more far reaching effect upon mankind than any other single sentence ever recorded by any prophet in any age. It might well be said that the crowning act of the ministry of James was not his martyrdom for the testimony of Jesus, but his recitation, as guided by the Holy Ghost, of these simple words which led to the opening of the heavens in modern times.

"And it might well be added that every investigator of revealed truth stands, at some time in the course of his search, in the place where Joseph Smith stood. He must turn to the Almighty and gain wisdom from God by revelation if he is to gain a place on that strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life" (DNTC, 3:246-247).

Ted Gibbons: If the Father gives wisdom to all men liberally, and without reproach or censure, and if we all lack wisdom, which we do, then this invitation of James ought to call thousands of us to our knees daily.

But 30 years of experience with the youth of Zion and about 50 with my own shortcomings has convinced me that some Church members are not receiving liberally. They kneel, and they ask, but they do not receive liberally. The reason for this failure seems to be included in the instruction. "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering." Doubt seems to be the death of successful prayers.

The question that comes to mind is this one: what sorts of things cause us to waver? What are the experiences, events, and attitudes that cause me to falter in my faith or to doubt the Lord's willingness to respond freely? What episodes cause us to be "double minded" and "unstable"? (James 1:8). . . Somehow this passage on prayer spoke to Joseph's heart with great power. Remember that he "reflected on it again and again." (New Testament GD Lesson 42, tedgibbons@yahoo.com)

Gene R. Cook: "When we pray with fervency we pray with real intent. We pray from the heart. We really mean what we say, and we say what we feel. This brings an added humility, an increased power to our prayers that we never have when we pray in a surface manner only, perhaps only speaking words. (*Receiving Answers to Our Prayers*, 54.)

APPLICATION: Sincere prayer strengthens our faith and brings us closer to God.

4. We should control our tongues and be slow to wrath and beware of double-mindedness.

James 1:26: If any man among you seem to be religious, and **bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart,** this man's religion is vain.

James 4:11-12: Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: **but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law,** but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: **who art thou that judgest another?**

James 3:3-18: 3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.
4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.
5 Even so **the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things.** Behold, how great a matter [forest] a little fire kindleth!
6 And **the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity:** so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.
7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:
8 **But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.**
9 Therewith **bless we God,** even the Father; and therewith **curse we men,** which are made after the similitude of God.
10 Out of the same mouth **proceedeth blessing and cursing.** My brethren, these things ought not so to be.
11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?
12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? **so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.**
13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him **shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.**
14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.
15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.
16 For **where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.**
17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.
18 **And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.**

Marvin J. Ashton: "We learn from James 3:5 that often 'the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things.' No thinking Latter-day Saint will permit his comments, attitudes, or expressions to be construed as boasting in his own strength. **Those who persist in boasting fail to recognize the true sources of personal achievement.**

"History teaches us that **those who boast in their own strength cannot have lasting success.** Constantly we should be reminded that we must not boast of faith nor of mighty works, but instead should **boast of God** in his blessings and goodness to us. God will help us to understand that **humility must be our foundation** if the goodness of the Lord is to continue to come to and from us. **The boasting man will certainly fall, because in his own strength no man endures.**" ("Neither Boast of Faith Nor of Mighty Works," *Ensign*, May 1990, 67)

Milton R. Hunter: "Throughout my life in mingling with many people of various religious denominations I have observed that as a rule it seems as if **human beings like to gossip.** We like to hear unsavory things about our neighbors and talk about each other. It seems that oft times **we get a certain degree of satisfaction** or even joy out of **saying bad things about other people.** We thoughtlessly and sometimes maliciously **judge each other.** We censure our associates sometimes unjustly, many times unkindly; and most of the time we speak **without having the evidence** to back up what we are saying. We seem to forget that James, the brother of the Lord, warned that the unbridled tongue is 'full of deadly poison.' (James 3:8.)

I know that even sometimes people who **are faithful** in the Church **pass judgment** and condemnation on those with whom they associate without knowing the facts. **Such is displeasing to God.** I know that many people's hearts have been broken and tears have been shed because of the unkind and perhaps untrue things that have been said about them and because of **unjust judgments** that we give of each other.

As I look into the faces of the members of this congregation, my conscience certainly tells me that **I err at times.** Sometimes I **gossip and judge others,** and when I do it I act unrighteously before the Lord. My heart tells me I would like to repent, I would like to **overcome my weakness of gossiping** and saying bad things about other people. I am sure that you feel the same as I do." (*Conference Report, October 1960, Afternoon Meeting 24.*)

President Gordon B. Hinckley: "As a young seminary teacher, unnoticed, I observed during one of their practices some of the young student athletes I taught. The next day, as my students entered the classroom, the chalkboard had written upon it **the words of some of the practice-field kind, as well as the words of the sacrament prayer and other sacred utterances and names.** With some embarrassment, we turned to the words of James: '**Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.** My brethren, these things ought not so to be.' (James 3:10.) The choices we make with our mouths are not determined by the setting in which we find ourselves, but **by the thoughts we create within and by the type of people we are striving to become.**" (Clean Speech Brings Blessings of Clean Thoughts and Behavior, *LDS Church News*, 1994, 12/31/94)

Double-mindedness:

James 1:6-7: But let him ask in faith, **nothing wavering.** For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. **A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.**

James 3:10: Out of the same mouth proceedeth **blessing and cursing.** My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

James 4:1-3: From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, **yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss,** that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

James 4:7-12: 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and **purify your hearts, ye double-minded.**
9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.
10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.
11 Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.
12 There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: **who art thou that judgest another?**

Sterling W. Sill: "James pointed out that '**a double minded man is unstable in all his ways**' (James 1:8). There are also some **triple-minded** and **quadruple-minded individuals**—people who have not tuned out enough of their distractions. **The secret of success is to limit the scope, narrow the vision, and concentrate the effort with a finer focus on a single objective**" ("The Strait Gate," *Ensign*, July 1980, 6).

Joseph B. Wirthlin: "**We cannot be double minded in our relationships** with husband or wife, parents or children. Are we going to savor the enjoyment of our children after they are a little older and we are not so busy? What about the valued friendships that fade because of the thoughtful, lengthy letters we plan to write but never finish and send? Are we faithful in going to our temples regularly? Consider the books we are going to read, the impulses to kindness we are going to act upon, and the good causes we are going to espouse. **Are we always packing our bags with the things we value most in life but never leave on the trip?** Does tomorrow never come? Let us resolve to begin to live today—not tomorrow, but today—this hour while we yet have time." ("The Time to Prepare," *Ensign*, May 1998, 16)

APPLICATION: Controlling our tongues helps lead to peace and is an important part of pure religion.

5. We should be "doers of the word," showing our faith by our works.

James 2:14-16: What doth it profit, my brethren, **though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?** can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; **what doth it profit?**

James 1:22-25, 27: But be ye **doers** of the word, and not hearers only, **deceiving your own selves.** For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a **doer** of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. . . **Pure religion** and undefiled before God and the Father is this, **To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.**

C. S. Lewis: "I am often, I believe, praying for others when I should be doing things for them. **It's so much easier to pray for a bore than to go and see him**" (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, in *The C.S. Lewis Bible*, 1397).

Spencer W. Kimball: "People tend often to measure their righteousness by the absence of wrong acts in their lives, as if passivity were the end of being. But God has created "things to act and things to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:14), and man is in the former category. **He does not fill the measure of his creation unless he acts**, and that in righteousness. "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not," warns James, "to him it is sin." (James 4:17.)

To be passive is deadening; to stop doing is to die. Here then is a close parallel with physical life. If one fails to eat and drink, his body becomes emaciated and dies. Likewise, **if he fails to nourish his spirit and mind, his spirit shrivels and his mind darkens**" (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 1982], 148).

Ted Gibbons: "James' description of "pure religion" in 2:27 is all about **doing and duty**, about the **faith to act**. Brigham Young one Sunday afternoon was informed that the survivors of an ill-fated handcart company, who suffered the snows of Wyoming, were about to arrive. The Salt Lake saints were assembled that morning in the Tabernacle:

Brigham Young spoke: "The afternoon meeting will be omitted, for I wish the sisters to go home and prepare to give those who have just arrived a mouthful of something to eat, and to wash them and nurse them up. You know that I would give more for a dish of pudding and milk, or a baked potato and salt, were I in the position of those persons who have just come in, than I would for all your prayers, though you were to stay here all the afternoon and pray. **Prayer is good, but when baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place . . .**" (Salt Lake *Deseret News*, Dec. 10, 1856, 320).

C. S. Lewis: "Christians have often disputed as to whether **what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ**. I have no right really to speak on such a difficult question, but it does seem to me like asking **which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary**. A serious moral effort is the only thing that will bring you to the point where you throw up the sponge [Americans might say "throw in the towel"]. **Faith in Christ is the only thing to save you from despair at that point: and out of that Faith in Him good actions must inevitably come**" (C.S. Lewis, from *Mere Christianity*, quoted in *The C.S. Lewis Bible*, 1396).

APPLICATION: We can live our religion more purely by mastering ourselves and doing good works.

6. Conclusion—Remember the words of James in your hearts and deeds:

- ❖ "if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God" (1:5).
- ❖ "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (1:8).
- ❖ "Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (1:19).
- ❖ "Pure religion and undefiled before God . . . is this. To visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (1:27).
- ❖ "If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (2:8).
- ❖ "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead" (2:17).
- ❖ "By works was faith made perfect" (2:22).
- ❖ "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity" (3:6).
- ❖ "Ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss" (4:2-3).
- ❖ "The friendship of the world is enmity with God" (4:4).
- ❖ "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (4:7).
- ❖ "Who art thou that judgest another?" (4:12).
- ❖ "To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (4:17).
- ❖ "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (5:16).

The summary of the epistle is captured in James's exhortation:
"Be ye doers of the word, and hot hearers only" (1:23)

President Heber J. Grant, stating that doing eclipses in importance any kind of knowing:

"There is but one path of safety to the Latter-day Saints, and that is the path of duty. It is not a testimony, it is not marvelous manifestation, it is not knowing that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that it is the plan of salvation--it is not actually knowing that the Savior is the Redeemer, and that Joseph Smith was His prophet that will save you and me; but it is the **keeping of the commandments of God, living the life of a Latter-day Saint**"

(Conference Report, April, 1915, 82, or *Gospel Standards*, 200).

Marvin J. Ashton: "Be one who **nurtures and who builds**. Be one who has an **understanding and a forgiving heart**, who **looks for the best** in people. **Leave people better than you found them**. **Lend a hand** to those who are frightened, lonely, or burdened. "If we could look into each other's hearts and understand the unique challenges each of us faces, I think we would **treat** each other much more gently, with **more love, patience, tolerance, and care**" ("The Tongue Can Be a Sharp Sword," *Ensign*, May 1992, 20).